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C.I.A. Weighs Action on Washington Post Article

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 21 — The Central Intelligence Agency is considering whether to take action against The Washington Post for an article about a classified intelligence-gathering operation involving American submarines, the White House said today.

"It is presently being analyzed by the C.I.A. to see if they have any specific problems with it," Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman, said of the article.

The article, which appeared in the Wednesday issue of The Post, indicated that a former National Security Agency employee on trial for spying, Ronald W. Pelton, had compromised an intelligence operation that used a "high-technology device" to monitor Soviet communications.

The article provided some new detail about Mr. Pelton's purported activities. It said that, according to unnamed sources, the interception device purportedly used against the Soviet Union had been retrieved by the Russians and that the United States had discovered "physical evidence" that the intelligence operation had been compromised. But much of the article repeated information readily available in court records.

Debate Before Publication

Publication of the article followed long discussions between the paper and Administration officials who asserted that news accounts about the Pelton case could violate a Federal law barring disclosure of communications information.

The Central Intelligence Agency said it would have no comment until after The Post's article had been reviewed by Government lawyers.

Earlier this week, William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, asked that NBC News be prosecuted for a report on the Pelton case.

In its article today, The Post said the paper had decided not to print a description of the interception device. The decision was made because of concerns of Post lawyers, and because the paper had been "unable fully to judge the validity of the national security objections of senior officials" in the Reagan Administration, the article said.

Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Post, said in an interview that editors had removed the equivalent of about two or three paragraphs describing the interception device.

"We took out certain details," he said. "The details of the operation, the readers won't know about."

Asked if the editing had affected the article's value, he said: "It depends on what your attitude is. It may have been significant to you." Asked the reaction of Post staff members to the editing, he said, "Some people are disappointed, and others are pleased."

More Reporting Foreseen

He said reporting on the story would continue, although he doubted the information left out in the article today would be included later. "What we kept out today, we will keep out tomorrow," he said.

Bob Woodward, one of two reporters on the story, said, "There was a lot of material we did not use, including details that we never considered publishing because of their sensitivity and some matters that were in earlier drafts."

Katharine Graham, chairman of the board of The Washington Post Company, said she did not believe the editing had affected the article's value. She described the editing as "proper — we handled it well."

The article described extensive Administration efforts to block publication earlier this month of a more detailed article on Mr. Pelton and what he supposedly told the Soviet Union.

The officials apparently learned of details in the article when The Post sought their comments before publication. They "strenously objected to its publication, arguing that it would seriously damage national security," the article said.

A Phone Call From the President

Mrs. Graham described a telephone conversation on May 10 with President Reagan, who urged her not to publish the article. "He just emphasized that he knew about the discussions under way and that he felt very strongly supportive of the people who were talking to us," she said of the President.

Mrs. Graham said the President noted that the Administration would consider prosecution of The Post should it publish the article.

"He mentioned it in the same way that it had been mentioned in other conversations," she said. "It was a very civilized, low-key conversation."

The C.I.A. had no comment when asked if it would request that the Justice Department prosecute The Post.

"What we've said all day is that it's in the hands of the lawyers," said Sharon Foster, a C.I.A. spokesman.

In recent days, Mr. Casey has threatened news organizations with prosecution under an espionage law barring publication of information about communications intelligence and the machinery used to code and decode secret messages. Leaks of information about communications intelligence have threatened national security, he said.

Justice Department officials have said privately they are not enthusiastic about prosecuting newspapers.

The department said today it would have no comment unless the C.I.A. made a formal request for criminal charges. A department official who asked not to be named said that it appeared that The Post would escape prosecution because the article had apparently been "carefully crafted" to avoid violations of the espionage law.

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